

Steatite Bowl Sherds from Southern and Eastern Ohio

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Remains of steatite vessels are of rare occurrence in Ohio and are invariably assigned to the Late Archaic "Transitional Period." Gartley (1976: 28-29) has summarized known occurrences in the state, which are limited to the following counties: Ashtabula, Trumbull, and Mahoning, along the Pennsylvania border; Hamilton, Scioto, and Washington, along the Ohio River; Hocking, Muskingum, and Perry, in southeastern Ohio. To these may now be added Morgan, Pickaway, Ross, and Tuscarawas.

Several years ago, in examining the estate of R. Max Gard, Lisbon, Ohio, two steatite bowl fragments from Tuscarawas County were noted, and, because of the significance of these artifacts, the Gard heirs offered to donate the sherds, along with a sandstone bowl sherd, to the Ohio Historical Society.

The sherds are clearly part of an older, purchased collection, but nothing more is known about their history. The body sherd is labelled "Midvale '26 Tusc. Co., Ohio Pottery Polisher" (Fig. 1). As steatite is too soft to have served as an effective "polisher," it is assumed that the groove was made preparatory to snapping the fragment in two or for some other, unknown purpose.

The second fragment (Fig. 2), which bears a lug handle, is simply labelled "Pottery Tus. Co. 0. 26" but is presumed to be from the same site. It is considered very likely that this is the Riker Site located near Midvale. Scanning what most likely will remain the definitive report on the Riker Site (Vietzen 1974), I find no reference to steatite, though this does not necessarily mean that examples of it do not occur at Riker, as clear evidence of Early Woodland and Archaic components exists in the extant collections and the literature.

The sandstone bowl sherd (Fig. 3), also bearing a lug handle, is simply labelled as being from Tuscarawas County. There is no particular reason to associate it with the Riker Site, although this seems a likely possibility. Allen (1981: 13) illustrates a portion of a reconstructed sandstone bowl with similar handle from

a site along the Walhonding, presumably in adjoining Coshocton County.

Currently on display at the Ohio Historical Center, Columbus, is the large fragment of steatite bowl illustrated in Fig. 4. Accession records reveal that it was found in a mound near Frankfort, Ross County, Ohio.

James Morton, Columbus, Ohio, who took the photographs accompanying this article, has provided a photograph of the steatite lug sherd illustrated in Figure 5. This specimen is part of the Ralph Dunkle Collection, Ashville, Ohio, and is believed to have been found north of Circleville, in Pickaway County.

Finally, Jeff Carskadden, Zanesville, Ohio, reports a steatite body sherd found by Paul Dietz near the mouth of Wolf Creek, Morgan County, Ohio. Carskadden (1982: 4-5) has also reported a steatite gorget from an Adena house site in Muskingum County and has informed me of correspondence between the late James W. Miller and Richard Gartley (letter dated July 17, 1976) detailing additional Scioto County steatite vessel sherds from the Abe Miller Farm, the George L. Davis farm, a quarter of a mile from the Feurt Site, and from west of the old mouth of the Scioto River, all sites along the Ohio and Scioto valleys.

These newly reported occurrences do little to augment our knowledge of the prehistoric and temporal distribution of steatite in Ohio. Most of the occurrences are along major tributaries of the Ohio, including the Scioto, Hocking, Muskingum, and Tuscarawas. Nearly all are surface finds from multicomponent sites or without precise temporal provenience. The single exception is the Frankfort Mound, but Gartley has reported several occurrences of steatite fragments in the fill of Early Woodland mounds in Hocking and Perry Counties. The Perry County mound occurrence is unique in being well away from the Ohio and any of its major tributaries. Occurrences in northeastern Ohio (Ashtabula, Trumbull, and Mahoning Counties) previously reported by Gartley appear to represent movement up the Beaver and Mahoning drainages. Steatite

fragments have also been found along the Ohio and its tributaries in adjacent Beaver County, Pennsylvania.

Age and cultural affiliation of the bowls represented by these sherds is presumed to be late Archaic or early Early Woodland, although some sherds found on multi-component sites or in Late Prehistoric Philo Phase contexts may have been "recycled" by later peoples. Enough occurrences have been reported to suggest that the apparent restriction of steatite to southern and eastern Ohio is a real geographic phenomenon and that its distribution is for the most part probably tied to movement along major waterways.

References

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Fig. 1 (Murphy) Steatite bowl sherd from Tuscarawas Co., Ohio.



Fig. 2 (Murphy) Steatite sherd with lug handle from Tuscarawas County, Ohio.



Fig. 4 (Murphy) Steatite bowl fragment from Ross County, Ohio.

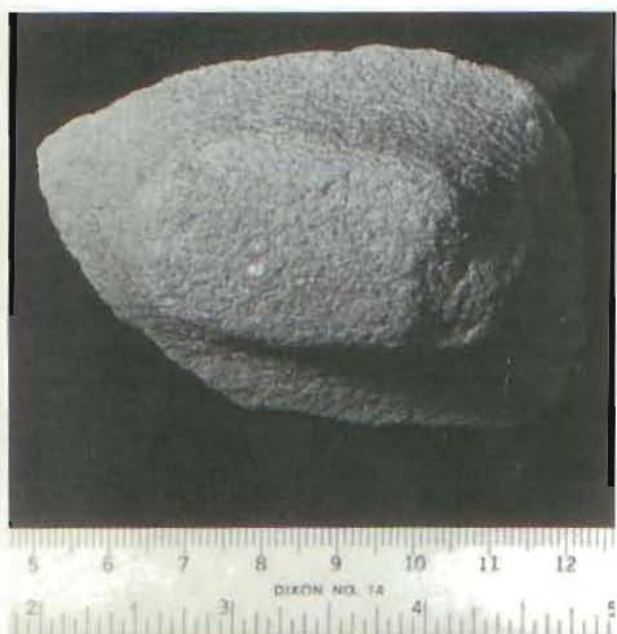


Fig. 3 (Murphy) Sandstone bowl sherd with lug handle from Tuscarawas County, Ohio.



Fig. 5 (Murphy) Steatite lug sherd, Probably from Pickaway County, Ohio.